

**Book Review: Hélène Cixous's Écriture Féminine**

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# Book Reviews

## HÉLÈNE CIXOUS'S *ÉCRITURE FÉMININE*

Ian Blyth and Susan Sellers, eds

*Hélène Cixous: Live Theory*

New York and London: Continuum, 2004, 164 pp., ISBN 0-8264-6679-6 (hbk), 0-8264-6680-X (pbk)

Faced with Hélène Cixous's prodigious and multi-generic output (an average of between one and two published texts for each year of her writing career), many readers feel the need of a *vade mecum* as they journey through this protean textual landscape. In attempting to provide such a resource, Blyth and Sellers acknowledge the inherent contradictions in their task, for any companion to Cixous could never be exhaustive in coverage. Moreover, in pursuing her multiple trajectories (playwright, academic, philosopher, cultural theorist, etc.), it quickly becomes apparent that many of the terms one might reach for in describing her endeavours – such as novelist – are only applicable in a limited and tangential way.

The four principal chapters of the analysis (after an Introduction, which provides a useful, largely biographically based overview) all pursue the notion of *écriture féminine* as it evolves within Cixous's ongoing project. At the outset, it is carefully established that, for Cixous, *écriture féminine* is not so much a 'theory' as a practice of writing, made manifest by observation rather than by definition. Nevertheless, insofar as Cixous's early writing (arguably the best-known part of her output) positions its own impulses in fluent and persuasively argued contradistinction to other more magisterial, formal and patriarchal writing practices, it must to an extent, as Blyth and Sellers emphasize, be seen as participating in a theoretical debate.

The kind of 'theory' that emerges from this exploration is a living, organic one (hence the title of this volume). As such, its continuance is assured not by means of cloning, but by (re)productive variation. Hence, Blyth and Sellers suggest in Chapter 3 that Cixous may use her fiction and theatrical writing – which they situate 'somewhere between poetic form and philosophical thought' (p. 35) – as testing grounds for her 'theoretical' ideas. Within this chapter, they trace a shift, from the mid-1970s onwards, away from the figure of the father (in such texts as *Inside*) to that of the mother, *Angst* being seen here as a key transitional text in which 'a new approach to the self and its others' is developed in a 'radical act of letting go' (p. 44).

Cixous's committed embrace of the theatre during the 1980s may on one level be seen as part of this opening-up to provisionality, but in a slightly paradoxical way. On the one hand, Cixous's writing for the theatre might be seen as a turn away from the experimental towards a more overt – some might say materialist –

engagement with history and politics. Moreover, in doing so, her writing resource was not so much the layers of her own psychic awareness and memory, as a self-imposed programme of rigorous research, in consultation with the Théâtre du Soleil directed by Mnouchkine. At rehearsal and production stage, however, the Cixousian text, no longer the product of a singular writing hand, became opened up to a collective authorship process, as it began to 'take shape and transform itself in the hands and voices of others' (p. 52). Thus, when exposed to the air, far from congealing into a definitive form, or 'authorised text', Cixous's theatrical text asserts its right to carry on developing and modifying.

The visual, expository potentialities of drama are present also, of course, in painting, whose interface with Cixous's writing is explored in Chapter 4. Though I would demur from the prevalent view that Cixous's poetic writing 'has much more in common with the art of painting than it does with the discipline of philosophy' (p. 67) – an observation which to my mind diminishes what philosophy can be and do – the luminosity of Cixous's poetic writing is here adroitly and compellingly explored. Communal pathways explored here (with Hokusai, with Shakespeare, with Derrida) broaden out in the subsequent chapter into avenues peopled by other writers – those she admires (including Kleist, Kafka, Joyce and, perhaps pre-eminently, Lispector), and those who engage with her own work (including Mireille Calle-Gruber and Derrida). Poignantly (Derrida having died since this book was published), Cixous in *Rootprints* characterizes death as having 'already taken place' for her, while Derrida is seen as 'expecting death in the future' (p. 73).

The final chapter consists of a hitherto unpublished 2002 interview with Cixous. Here, the writer can be witnessed engaging in a practice at which she excels – that of meditating aloud, in response to prompts. Arriving at, and then departing from, the perception that music precedes everything, that poetry and philosophy are pulsed through with song, she pictures her own writing memorably as a succession of 'floating things, leaves, small barks, sails or fish' borne along on 'the musical movement of thinking' (p. 100). Among the 'floating things' she discusses are the nets and filters through which writing passes (the choice or evasion of a language; the reverberation of silence; the navigation of coincident contraries such as Hell and Paradise, anger and joy; the dialogic space afforded by the theatre, etc.).

One small caveat: Cixous's writing, often punning, allusive, devoid of helping punctuation, can provide traps for the unwary translator, and one or two of them are collided into here, with misleading results. For example, in Cixous's postscript to *Angst*, the proclamation 'Dix livres à vouloir en finir avec la mort' is translated (p. 43) as 'Ten books to want to finish it with death', rather than 'to want to have done with death', the former phraseology suggesting the reading that death is a culminating point rather than a reality set aside. Just before this, the words 'le premier [pas] après dieu la mort' is translated as 'the first after god the dead' rather than 'the first after god, death'. Here, the word 'pas' resounds with its double meaning, i.e. 'step' and 'not', suggesting that the first step was also the first refusal, of God, and then of death. The challenge to the translator is to recognize and render Cixous's innovative coinages, many of which are doing double duty. One such example is the term 'démôisation', aligned rightly here with the state of being devoid of self, but without acknowledgement of its other possible and highly suggestive meaning: the state of being devoid of *Moïse* (Moses, the law-giver).

These minor quibbles apart, this book constitutes an excellent introduction to Cixous's work. What Cixous requires of theory – that it be 'useful and

traversable' (p. 114) – finds itself realized in this study. The main chapters are accompanied with thorough notes, and an extensive Bibliography and well-managed index make this a valuable research resource. Using the diverse manifestations of *écriture féminine* as an analytical vehicle, the authors are able to suggest productive ways of travelling through and alongside Cixous's work. In so doing, they do not balk at exposing what some have seen as inconsistencies in Cixous's exposition of *écriture féminine*. Appropriately, though, they allow Cixous to speak for herself: her project is to give the apple trees of gender a thorough shaking 'inside out, upside down' (p. 30).

Perhaps if Adam had mustered a smile rather than a frown at Eve's joyful apple-gobbling, the flowering of oppositional 'masculine' and 'feminine' economies would have been nipped in the bud.

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#### INTERROGATING CONSTITUTIONAL JURISPRUDENCE FROM A GENDERED POINT OF VIEW: ASKING TOO MUCH, OR NOT ENOUGH?

Beverly Baines and Ruth Rubio-Marin, eds

*The Gender of Constitutional Jurisprudence*

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005, xiii + 342 pp., ISBN 0-521-53027-X (hbk), 0-521-82336-6 (pbk)

*The Gender of Constitutional Jurisprudence* is a wide-ranging and very interesting survey of constitutional principles on gender and their enforcement by the constitutional courts in 12 countries (Australia, Canada, Colombia, Costa Rica, France, Germany, India, Israel, South Africa, Spain, Turkey and the USA). The authors are all scholars highly qualified in themes related to gender. Each of the 12 chapters gives a quick but comprehensive account of the recent constitutional history of the country examined, then focuses on constitutional provisions about gender and on a review of gender-related case law. Each chapter also offers a brief bibliography. Technical aspects (e.g. the rules of constitutional proceedings) are plainly explained, and thus the reading of the book, even if obviously easier for experts in law, can be enjoyed by a larger public.

As the editors underline in their Introduction, the case law reported makes up a possible 'feminist constitutional agenda', and brings together a large number of themes. Most of them (from employment discrimination to political underrepresentation) are common to the different countries; some (e.g. the rights to land sacred to aboriginal women in Australia) are more specific to a single country.

Even if aware of the 'discursive power' of constitutions and of constitutional jurisprudence, even if conscious that (as Isabel Karpin and Karen O'Connell write in their profound essay on Australia) 'The Constitution – any Constitution – is limited by the forms of power in which it is embedded' (p. 46), and that, on the other hand, 'the interests of women are not unitary but diverse', the writings collected in this book share on the whole the idea that constitutional provisions and constitutional claims are useful tools in order to improve the condition of women as a group, especially when fully implemented by the courts (where even more women judges should sit), and provided that the mere 'formal equality' gives way to 'substantive equality'.

Whereas formal equality (equality before the law) neutralizes differences